
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

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Herbal Remedies – Choose Wisely

Recently, interest by both patients and physicians in unconventional therapies such as herbal remedies, acupuncture, mind-body interventions and the like has grown substantially. Many of these treatments have a great deal to offer, particularly when integrated with conventional medical treatment. But not all alternative therapies are safe and effective.

The wide availability of alternative treatments makes it even more important than ever to be an informed consumer. Alternative cures for common ailments and serious maladies can have a serious effect on your wallet, and can leave you as sick as ever. It is easy to find advertisements pushing cures for baldness and arthritis, vitamins for longer life, and no-exercise ways to lose weight. Many people are tempted to try shortcuts to solve their health concerns. It might be easy to bite on these sugarcoated pitches, but the result usually is a bitter pill to swallow.

Poison control centers in various states are reporting adverse reactions to a broad range of supplements on the market today. Many consumers become victims because they believe that if a product wasn't safe, the government would not allow it to be sold. That is simply not true.

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 severely restricts the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) authority over virtually any product labeled "supplement" so long as the product makes no claim to affect a disease. A supplement is presumed safe until the FDA receives numerous reports of adverse reactions. At that point the agency can warn the public, suggest changes in the supplement to make it safer, urge the manufacturers to recall the product, or recall or seize the product itself. To seize the supplement, the FDA must prove that it is unsafe. By contrast, drugs that do affect a disease must undergo clinical studies to determine their safety and effectiveness. The FDA must review the data and authorize a drug's uses before it is sold.

How can you tell if an advertising claim for a "miracle" health-related product is likely to be phony, exaggerated, or unproven? When reading advertisements about alternative medicine/herbal remedies, ask yourself these questions:

- Does the pitch offer a quick and painless cure?
- Is the product described as "special," "secret," "foreign," or "ancient formula," and available only by mail and only from one supplier?

- Are testimonials or case histories the only evidence the treatment works? Most "testimonials" are not reliable.
- Is the product advertised for a wide variety of medical conditions?
- Does it claim to be a medical breakthrough being stifled by the U.S. Government?
- Do the ad's claims sound too good to be true?

"Yes" answers to these questions strongly indicate the advertisement is questionable. When purchasing health-related products do your research first and consult with your family doctor and other trusted healthcare professionals. Always discuss your medical problems or concerns with your family doctor. You could lose your money and increase your health risk, especially if you delay or forego proper medical treatment.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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